

Notice of Proposed Action

Opportunity to Provide Scoping Comments

Lakes Basin Project

Beckwourth Ranger District

Plumas National Forest

Plumas and Sierra Counties, California



Lakes Basin Area – Mt. Elwell

Comments Welcome

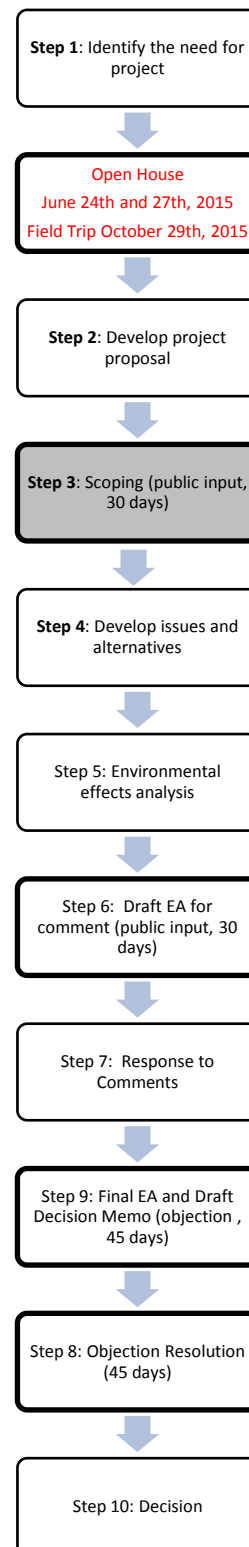
The Beckwourth Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest invites and encourages interested parties to make comments during the development of this project. The District has recently developed a proposed action. These activities include the reduction of hazardous fuels; re-introduction of fire; improvement of forest health; improvement of aspen stands and meadow systems; and enhancement of water quality. The public is encouraged to take part in the environmental analysis process for the Lakes Basin Project by submitting **written** comments.

Where is this project in the Forest Service NEPA process?

NEPA (short for the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969) guides the Forest Service decision-making process and provides opportunities for interested parties to give their ideas about resource management. Input during the scoping period (step 3 in diagram to right) is important in helping the Forest Service identify resource needs which will shape the alternatives that are evaluated and lead to the formation of a decision.

The Lakes Basin Project is under the provisions of the Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP) (USDA 1988) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) FSEIS and ROD (USDA 2004a, 2004b). Public notice, comment and administrative review for this project is governed by 36 CFR 218 Subpart A and B regulations that provide for a pre-decisional objection process for projects documented in a Record of Decision or Decision Notice. The diagram to the right shows the steps of the NEPA process for this proposed project. The box highlighted in grey indicates where the attached proposed action is in that process. Boxes with a thicker, bold outline are public involvement opportunities offered during the planning process.

As you review and consider the proposed land management action, we encourage you to let us know if you have any suggestions, comments, or concerns – we want to hear them all. Are we missing something? Tell us. Know that we are single-mindedly dedicated to responsible conservation, collaboration and applying the best available science along with local knowledge. The feedback we get from our community members has an enormous impact on how we develop and implement projects, so please know your input is important to us. We read every email and letter sent to us.



The Lakes Basin Project Team

Introduction

The Lakes Basin project area encompasses approximately 12,674 acres, with approximately 6,820 acres proposed for treatment and is located on the Beckwourth Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest. Lakes Basin is a unique area on the Plumas National Forest. Past glaciation is responsible for the many sharp peaks and ridges of exposed granite that divide the Basin. The area contains over twenty lakes, ranging from three acres to the 500 acre Gold Lake. Forested habitat ranges from almost pure pine at the low elevation, through Sierra mixed conifer, up to pure red fir and subalpine forests. In addition, there are large areas of brush, open rocky habitat and talus slopes, wet meadows and riparian areas. The area has an equally high diversity of wildlife ranging from marten habitat in the high elevations, California spotted owl and Northern goshawk, to Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog habitat within riparian areas.

The Lakes Basin area is a historically significant area which has been utilized by Native Americans to early American settlers. Native Americans utilized the area for its high grade basalt for stone tools which they traded throughout the state of California. Many of the trails located within the Lakes Basin area were originally Native American trails that are still used today. During the early 1900's the Lakes Basin area was used for primarily gold mining and logging was active near the town of Graeagle.

The Lakes Basin Recreation Area (LBRA) was established in 1926 by the Secretary of Agriculture, due to the popularity of recreating in the Lakes Basin area (15,308 acres). Several of these historic lodges are still in use today; Gray Eagle, Elwell and Gold Lake Lodges. There are a wide spectrum of recreation opportunities available to Forest visitors within the project area including a combination of developed and semi-primitive camping, resorts, equestrian stables, hiking, mountain bike, and motorized trails. A significant portion (5,163 treated acres) of the project is within the boundary of the LBRA.

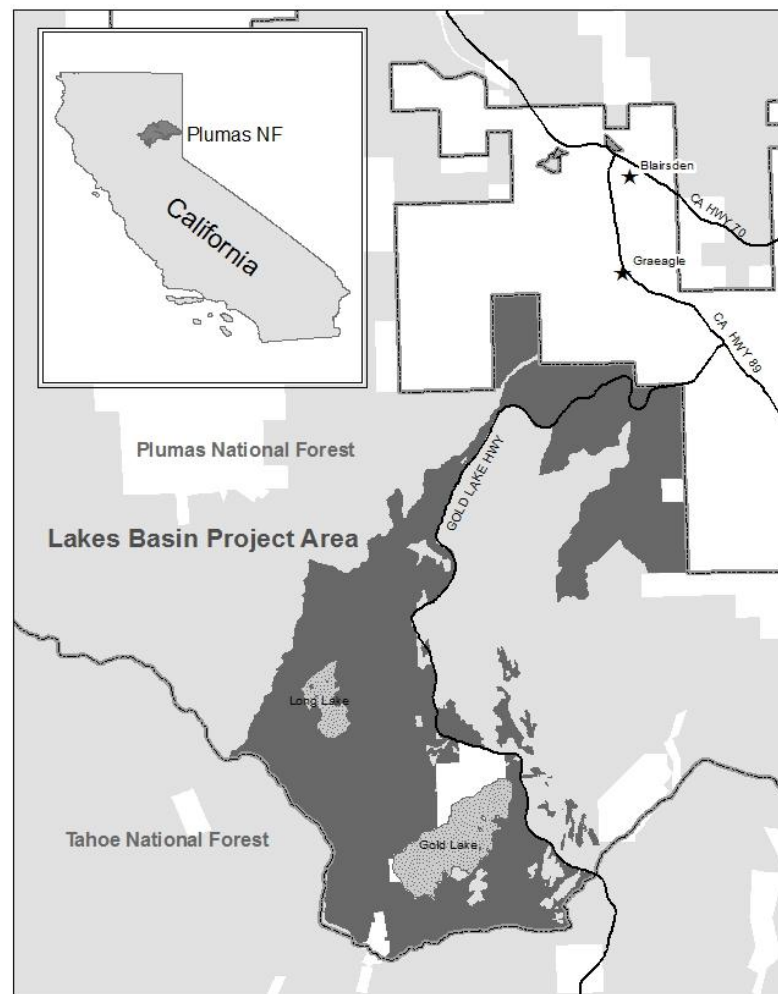


Figure 1. Lakes Basin Project boundary.

The legal description of the proposed project encompasses all or portions of T22N, R11E, Sec. 36, T22N, R12E, Sec. 21-22, 27-29, 31-34, T21N, R11E, Sec. 1, 12-13, 24, T21N, R12E, Sec. 3-6, 7-10, 15-18, 19-22, 30, Mount Diablo Base Meridian (MDBM).

Purpose and Need

The Lakes Basin Project is located within a diverse landscape ranging from Mohawk Valley (elevation 4,600 feet) through mixed conifer forests to subalpine fir stands (Mount Elwell, elevation 7,818) within the Frazer Creek-Middle Fork Feather River subwatershed. Stands within the project area are at risk to higher than normal levels of bark beetle mortality due to overstocking of trees and drought conditions (Cluck 2012), especially within the mixed conifer stands. Fire exclusion and historic logging has allowed conifer species composition to shift to

favor shade-tolerant species. Thinning shade-tolerant species would shift these stands within their natural range of variability.

The Lakes Basin Project aims to improve forest health, reduce hazardous fuels; re-introduce fire, reduce conifer encroachment into aspen stands and meadows, and improve water quality.

The underlying purpose and need for the Lakes Basin Project has been determined by comparing the desired conditions to the existing conditions. Desired conditions relevant to this project relate to forest health and ecosystem function and resiliency as defined in the Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (PNF LRMP 1988, SNFPA 2004). The proposed action would address the need to improve forest health, create conditions that foster and accelerate forest diversity and promote resilience to drought and wildfire and the potential effects of climate change. It would restore forest conditions, to the extent possible given changing climatic conditions, to a more natural range of variability.

The need for change derives from the difference between the existing condition and the desired condition. It is summarized as follows:

Purpose and Need 1: Improve forest health and forest resiliency

Objective: Improve forest health and promote resilience to drought, wildfire, and insects by:

- Reducing stand densities
- Increasing structural diversity,
- Encouraging the regeneration of shade intolerant fire resilient tree species
- Decreasing surface fuels and modifying aerial fuel arraignment.

Need for Action

The absence of a natural fire regime and past management practices have left the Lakes Basin Project area with less structural complexity, greater uniformity in age-classes, and increased densities of shade-tolerant tree species (e.g., white fir and incense cedar) relative to historical forest structure (Cluck 2012). Shade-tolerant tree species dominate the understory and share the overstory within mixed conifer stands. These understory trees (shade-tolerant species) act as ladder fuels by potentially allowing a ground fire to transition into a stand replacing crown fire. Increased tree density (i.e., resulting from stands of shade-tolerant species) also means there is more competition for limited resources (water, sunlight, growing space and nutrients). Conifers with limited resources and a high degree of competition often have decreased vigor and growth, especially during drought conditions, and may become more susceptible to insect attack. Many stands within the project area have experienced and may continue to undergo varying levels of mortality associated with high stand densities, drought, insects and diseases. Successive dry years can exacerbated unhealthy stand conditions. This typically results in higher

levels of bark beetle caused mortality. Through aerial detection surveys from 2002 through 2011 when precipitation levels were normal to above normal approximately 17-210 dead trees were observed. However, during drier than normal conditions, about 210 – 24,000 dead trees were observed (Cluck 2012).

Desired Conditions

The desired conditions for forest health and forest resiliency would be:

- Increased tree vigor by reducing stand densities leaving residual stands less susceptible to large scale insect disturbances, drought and composed of mostly fire-resilient/shade intolerant tree species (i.e. ponderosa, Jeffrey and sugar pine, and Douglas-fir) (SNFPA ROD, pp. 41, 49, 52).
- A majority of stands are a mosaic, uneven-aged, multi-storied dominated by large, fire-resilient trees. Stands are comprised of three general conditions that would follow ecological and moisture gradients such as topographic position, aspects, etc : (1) high density, closed-canopy groups of trees; (2) open gaps; (3) and low-density areas dominated by large pine trees. Increased regeneration of fire-resilient tree species (SNFPA ROD, pg. 41).
- Maintaining and restoring habitat connectivity within forest types across the landscape (SNFPA ROD, pp. 31, 53-54).
- Reduced ladder fuels and decreased surface fuel loading in order to reduce the size and severity of wildfire across the landscape (SNFPA ROD, pp. 34, 49-50).

Purpose and Need 2: Improve aspen stands and meadow systems

Objective: Improve aspen growing conditions by releasing aspen stands from conifer competition. Improve meadow systems by removing conifers that have encroached within meadows.

Need for Action

Aspen stands and meadows located in the Lakes Basin Project area are smaller in size due to conifer encroachment, low in health and vigor, which may be due to one or more of the following factors: past fire suppression, natural succession that favors conifers in the competition for sunlight and moisture, or human-caused changes to the local hydrologic regime (e.g. roads). Field evaluation indicates that, regardless of the relative contribution of these various factors, competition by conifers is a major factor in the decline of the aspen stands and meadows in the project area. Reducing the shading effects and water intake from adjacent conifers would allow for aspen stand expansion and sprouting leading to an increase in health, vigor and productivity of the stands.

Desired Conditions

The desired conditions for aspen stands and meadow systems would be:

- Expansion of aspen stands and meadows back towards historical conditions (SNFPA ROD, pp. 32, 42-43)...
- Increased aspen sprouting for multi-layered, multi-aged aspen canopies (SNFPA ROD, pp. 32, 42-43, 64).
- Maintain and restore important characteristics of meadow and aspen stands such as: plant diversity which would provide important habitat for insects (bumble bees) and animal communities; maintain and restore the timing, variability and duration of flooding within meadows and aspen stands; increase the level of water tables; and recharge ground water supplies (SNFPA ROD, pp. 32-33, 63).

Purpose and Need 3: Provide road access needed to meet project objectives while reducing transportation system effects on watershed resources

Objective: Protect water quality and riparian habitat by ensuring that existing roads meet Best Management Practices for drainage during rainfall and snowmelt runoff events. Identify roads that degrade water quality and implement corrective actions.

Need for Action

Roads play a vital role in providing access for resource management, wildland fire suppression, and public access for recreation use. However, unneeded and poorly located roads can impact water quality, disrupt the flow of water and fragment forest habitats. During the travel management planning process (USDA 2010a, b), the routes not added to the NFS transportation network were not physically closed. These non-system routes are not maintained and many of them are adversely impacting watershed conditions; these routes should be closed or obliterated.

Desired Conditions

The desired conditions for providing the road access needed to meet project objectives while reducing transportation system effects on natural resources would be:

- Access provided for resource management by Forest Service personnel.
- Access for wildland fire suppression.
- Public access for recreation purposes.
- Decreased number of roads that are causing resource damage.
- All NFS system roads and trails comply with the appropriate Best Management Practices.

Proposed activities are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Summary of treatments proposed under the Lakes Basin Project.

Treatment Type	Acres
Wildland Urban Interface	

Hand thin	28
Grapple Pile Brush Fields	73
Grapple Pile with hand fall	69
Mechanical Thin	488
Aspen Thinning (Mechanical and hand thinning)	3
Meadow Thinning	8
Mechanical Thin with recreation areas	16
Underburn	54
Total WUI	739
General Forest	
Hand thin	179
Grapple Pile Brush Fields	67
Grapple Pile with hand fall	52
Mechanical Thin	1,733
Aspen Thinning	104
Meadow Thinning	66
Mechanical Thin with recreation areas	237
Total General Forest	2,438
Underburn	3,794

Table 2. Lakes Basin Project proposed action for adding roads to the system and road obliteration.

Road Identification Number	Road Status	Action	Miles
21N10A	Non-System	Existing road – Add to system	0.15
21N10B	Non-System	Existing road – Add to system	0.07
21N10C	Non-System	Existing road – Add to system	0.04
21N10D	Non-System	Existing road – Add to system	0.54
NSR1*	Non-System	Obliterate	0.38
NSR4	Non-System	Obliterate	0.28
NSR6	Non-System	Add to system	0.09
NSR9	Non-System	Obliterate	0.06
NSR10	Non-System	Obliterate	0.17
NSR11	Non-System	Obliterate	0.10
NSR12	Non-System	Obliterate	0.28
NSR12A	Non-System	Obliterate	0.50
NSR14	Non-System	Add to system	0.23
NSR15	Non-System	Add to system	0.04
NSR16	Non-System	Obliterate	.012
NSR17	Non-System	Obliterate	0.07
NSR18	Non-System	Obliterate	0.04
NSR19	Non-System	Obliterate	0.05
NSR20	Non-System	Obliterate	0.08
NSR21	Non-System	Obliterate	0.16
NSR21A	Non-System	Obliterate	0.003
NSR21B	Non-System	Obliterate	0.15
NSR22	Non-system	Obliterate	0.07
NSR27A	Non-system	Obliterate	0.04
NSR27B	Non-system	Obliterate	0.16

*NSR stands for non-system road.

Legal Compliance

Direction for the Plumas National Forest is based on the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (commonly referred to as the “Forest Plan”) and a major Forest Plan amendment.

In August 1988, the Regional Forester signed the Record of Decision for the Forest Plan. In January 2004, the Regional Forester signed the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) final supplemental EIS Record of Decision, which replaced the 2001 SNFPA Record of Decision. The 2001 SNFPA final EIS and Record of Decision are incorporated by reference in the 2004 Record of Decision on the SNFPA final supplemental EIS. The 2004 Record of Decision on the SNFPA final supplemental EIS directed the Plumas National Forest to implement the HFQLG Pilot Project. When the HFQLG Act expired on September 30, 2012, the Plumas began implementing 2004 SNFPA direction for all projects.

The 1988 *Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (commonly referred to as the “Forest Plan”), as amended by the 2004 SNFPA final supplemental EIS Record of Decision, guides the proposed action and alternatives. The 2004 SNFPA Record of Decision (page 49-56) displays the standards and guidelines added to the 1988 Forest Plan. Land allocations in the 2004 SNFPA that apply to this proposal include: Lakes Basin Recreation Area, Frazier Creek eligible wild and scenic river, WUI Defense Zones, WUI Threat Zones, Old Forest Emphasis Areas, California spotted owl and goshawk Protected Activity Centers, California spotted owl Home Range Core Areas, and general forest.

Project Schedule

The Forest Service is planning to release the draft Lakes Basin Project Environmental Assessment (EA) for another 30 day comment period beginning in August 2016. The draft EA will disclose public involvement efforts and comments submitted during scoping and issues and alternatives being considered in detail and their predicted environmental effects. The Forest Service is planning to release this draft EA and the final EA to those who have submitted comments and to those who have requested to be included on the project mailing list.

The final EA along with the draft decision notice (DN) will be circulated for 45 days during the objection period expected to start in January 2017, with a decision in May 2017 followed by implementation as early as summer of 2017.

Responsible Official

Daniel Lovato, Acting Forest Supervisor, P.O. Box 11500, 159 Lawrence Street, Quincy, CA 95971, is the Responsible Official.

Nature of Decision to be Made

The Responsible Official will decide to implement this proposal, implement an alternative that moves the area towards the desired condition, or not to implement any project at this time.

Figure 2 Lakes Basin Proposed Action treatment units.

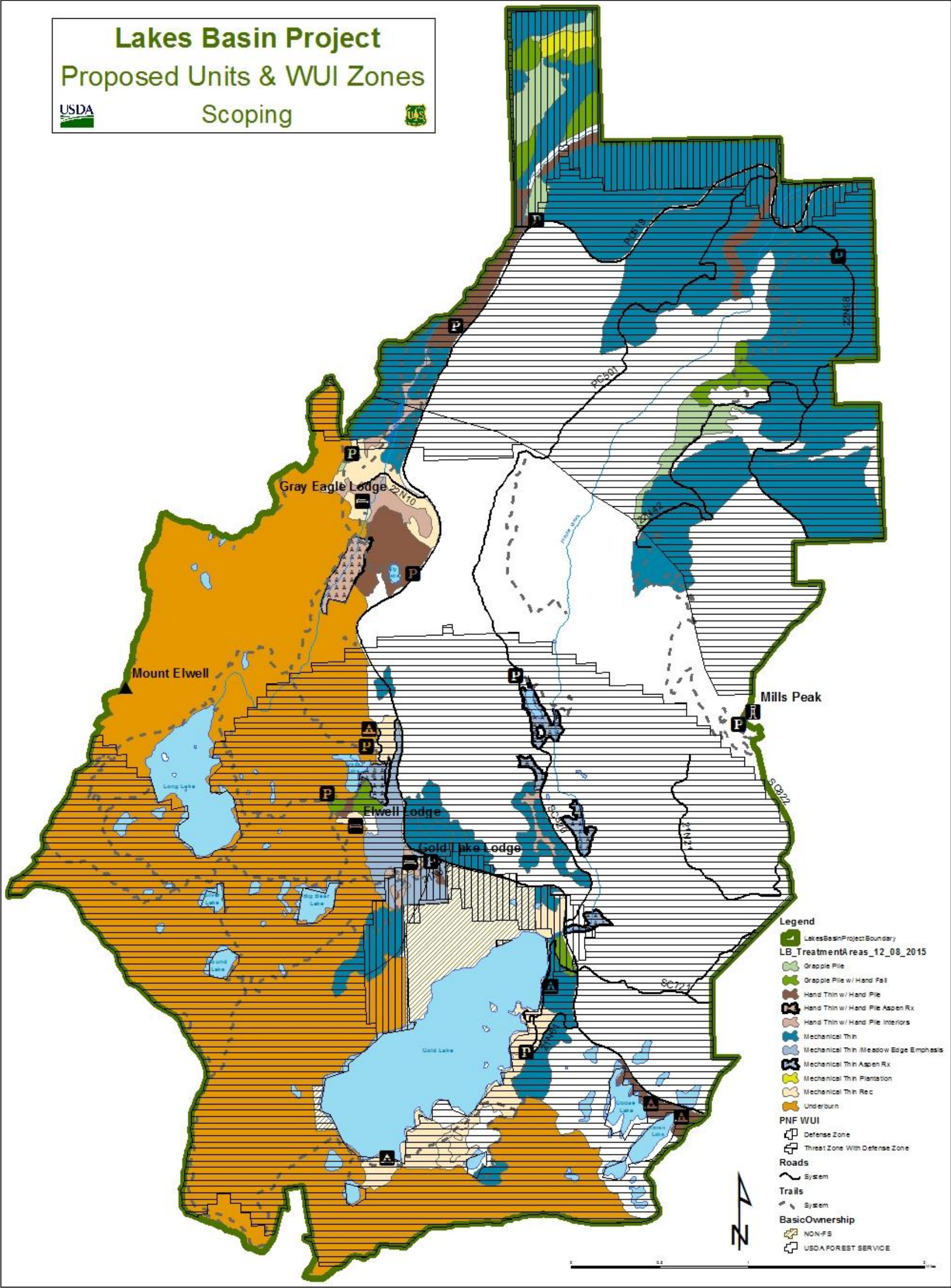


Figure 3. Lakes Basin proposed road obliteration and road additions.

